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ABSTRACT

By creative excerpting it is possible to use classical literature to illustrate historical issues of contemporary significance. Thucydides' "Peloponnesian War" provides such illustrations as the Funeral Oration of Pericles, which might be a contemporary eulogy for those who died for the continuance of their democracy; the debate between the Athenians and the islanders of Melos with the Athenians' justifying the "necessity" of their invasion; and the history of self interest among Athenian leaders, which eventually brought their democracy to an end. Thucydides in modern context is rewarding reading, can fascinate a class, and can change the prejudice that antiquity is for museums and quivering scholars. The author is director of Project Upward Bound, State University of New York, Stony Brook. (Author/JH)

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by
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by

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PREFACE

The author of this Occasional Paper, Professor A.W. Godfrey, is a classicist, linguist, and Director of Stony Brook's Upward Bound program--a federally funded precollege program for academically and economically disadvantaged youth.

What is a classical scholar doing as Director of a program such as Upward Bound? There is a distinction between the study of history--particularly the "classical" period--as mere pedantry and the study of the past as an opportunity to gain understandings and insights which can be applied to the present. The latter is the essence of the approach suggested by Professor Godfrey.

He is concerned with an attempt to relate the study of ancient history and classical historical literature to an increased awareneness of certain "universal" issues--not the least of which being the relationship between cause and effect in historical events.

Thus, selections from the field of ancient history are presented as opportunities for providing students with insights concerning the nature of human experience--past, present, and perhaps even future.

Seen in this context, the study of ancient history ceases to be the exclusive domain of the antiquarian, and becomes a field of inquiry with contemporary relevance.

Stony Brook, New York

E.S.

The teaching of Ancient History and classical literature has lately been much in decline. This most probably is due to the quest for "relevance" combined with the rather naive assumption that "real" history began in 1492 with the illumination of the Dark Ages by the "discovery" of America which, incidentally coincided with the Renaissance. Certainly the age of discovery and the rebirth of "humanistic" values symbolize to some historians and teachers the entry of our civilization into the modern era.

Consequently, the history of the ancient world is not considered to have much bearing on recent historical developments. Nevertheless, observation and interpretation of the remote past can produce startling and striking resemblances to recent events, and therefore can offer insight into both the historical past and the present.

Even a quick reading of Thucidides' Peloponnesian War will illustrate this point and serve as a pessimistic documentation of man's capacity for blindness and stupidity. The text certainly needs to be excerpted creatively, since the author's discussion and analysis of many political and diplomatic relationships are much too complicated for the general student. Nonetheless, there are passages of some length that can be used advantageously to illustrate that "the more we change, the more we remain the same".

Several years ago, I distrubuted to a group of high school students a duplicated version of the Funeral Oration of Pericles (Book II,Chap 4), after editing the text very slightly to eliminate names or references that might identify the work.

> 'I shall begin by speaking about our forefathers, since it is only right and proper on such an occasion to pay them the honour of recalling what they did. In this land of ours there have always been the same people living from generation up till now, and they, by their courage and their virtues, have handed it on to us, a free country. They certainly deserve our praise. Even more so do our fathers deserve it. For to the inheritance they had received they added what we have now, and it was not without blood and toil that they handed it down to us of the present generation. And then we ourselves, assembled here to-day, who are mostly in the prime of life, have in most directions, added to our power and have organized our State in such a way that it is perfectly well able to look after itself both in peace and in war.
>
> Let me say that our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours. It is more the case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other.We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect.

We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break.

Then there is a great difference between us and our opponents, in our attitude towards military security. Here are some examples: Our country is open to the world, and we have no periodical deportations in order to prevent people observing or finding out secrets which might be of military advantage to the enemy. This is because we rely, not on secret weapons, but on our own courage and loyalty. There is a difference, too, in our educational systems. From their earliest boyhood, others have submitted to the most laborious training in courage; we pass our lives without all these restrictions, and yet are just as ready to face the same dangers as they are.

We regard wealth as something to be properly used, rather than as something to boast about. As for poverty, no one need be ashamed to admit it: the real shame is in not taking practical measures to escape from it. Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well informed on general politics!

We make friends by doing good to others, not by receiving good from them. This makes our friendship all the more reliable, since we want to keep alive the gratitude of those who are in our debt by showing continued goodwill to them: whereas the feelings of one who owes us something lack the same enthusiasm, since he knows that, when he repays our kindness, it will be more like paying back a debt than giving something spontaneously. We are unique in this. When we do kindnesses to others, we do not do them out of any calculations of profit or loss: we do them without afterthought, relying on our free liberality. Taking everying together then, I declare that our city is an education to the world, and I declare that in my opinion each single one of our citizens, in all the manifold aspects of life, is able to show himself

the rightful lord and owner of his own person, and do this, moreover, with exceptional grace and exceptional versatility. And to show that this is no empty boasting for the present occasion, but real tangible fact, you have only to consider the power which our city possesses and which has been won by those very qualities which I have mentioned. We alone of the states we know, comes to her testing time in a greatness that surpasses what was imagined of her. In her case, and in her case alone, no invading enemy is ashamed at being defeated, and no subject can complian of being governed by people unfit for their responsbilities. Mighty indeed are the marks and monuments which we have left.

This, then, is the kind of nation for which these men, who could not bear the thought of losing her, nobly fought and nobly died. It is only natural that every one of us who survive them should be willing to undergo hardships in her service. And it was for this reason that I have spoken at such length about our nation, because I wanted to make it clear that for us there is more at stake than there is for others who lack our advantages; also I wanted my words of praise for the dead to be set in the bright light of evidence. And now the most important of these words has been spoken. I have sung the praises of our nation, but it was the courage and gallantry of these men, and of people like them, which made her splendid.

For these reasons I shall not grieve with those parents of the dead, who are present here. Instead I shall try to comfort them. They are well aware that they have grown up in a world where there are many changes and chances. But this is good fortune - for men to end their lives with honour, as these have done, and for you honourably to lament them: their life was set to a measure where death and happiness went hand in hand. I know that it is difficult to convince you of this. When you see other people happy you will often be reminded of what used to make you happy too.

> One does not feel sad at not having some good thing which is outside one's experience: real grief is felt at the loss of something which one is used to. All the same, those of you who are of the right age must bear up and take comfort in the thought of having more children. In your own homes these new children will prevent you from brooding over those who are no more, and they will be a help to the city, too, both in filling the empty places, and in securing her security. For it is impossible for a man to put forward fair and honest views about our affairs, if he has not, like everyone else, children whose lives may be at stake. As for those of you who are now too old to have children, I would ask you to count as gain the greater part of your life, in which you have been happy, and remember that what remains is not long, and let your hearts be lifted up at the thought of the fair fame of the dead. One's sense of honour is the only thing that does not grow old, and the last pleasure, when one is worn out with age, is not, as the poet said, making money, but having the respect of one's fellow men.

I gave the students time to read and then asked them who wrote the speech they had just read. The first and most general reply was: "John Kennedy". When I suggested that it had been written much earlier, students ventured Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson or George Washington. The hint that it had been written still earlier brought responses of England, France Ireland or Poland-as early as the Sixteenth Century. When I identified the source and date of the speech they were amazed that a speech written more than 2300 years ago should sound like a presidential inaurural address. Some remained unconvinced and believed I had fabricated the whole thing. The text in a printed book, however, convinced the class that I had invented neither the speech nor the source.

A Companion piece to the "Funeral Oration" was the "Melian Dialogue" (Book V, Chap7), a dialogue between the Ambassadors from Athens and the representatives from the Island State of Melos, which refused to join the Athenian Confederation or Delian League. The text shows a certain evolution and alteration of the ideals stated in the speech of Pericles when concerns about national security seemed of some consequence. [Book V Chap 7]

> The Melians are a colony from Sparta. They had refused to join the Athenian empire like the other islanders, andat first had remained neutral without helping either side but afterwards, when the Athenians had brought force to bear on them by laying waste their land, they had become open enemies of Athens.
>
> Now the generals Cleomedes, the son of Lycomedes, and Tisias, the son of Tisimachus, encamped with the above force in Melian territory and, before doing any harm to the land, first of all sent representatives to negotiate. The Melians asked the Athenians to make the statement for which they had come in front of the governing body and the few. The Athenian representatives then spoke as follows:
>
> Melians: No one can object to each of us putting forward our own views in a calm atmosphere. That is perfectly reasonable. What is scarcely consistent with such a proposal is the present threat, indeed the certainty, of your making war on us. We see that you have come prepared to judge the argument yourselves, and that the likely end of it all will be either war, if we prove that we are in the right, and so refuse to surrender, or else slavery.
>
> Athenians: If you are going to spend the time in enumerating your suspicions about the future, or if you have met here for any other reason except to look the facts in the face and on the basis of these facts to consider how you can save your city from destruction, there is no point in our going on with this discussion.

You know as well as we do that, when matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.

Melians: Then in our view (since you force us to leave justice out of account and to confine ourselves to self-interest) - in our view it is at any rate useful that you should not destroy a principle that is to the general good of all men - namely, that in the case of all who fall into danger there should be such a thing as fair play and just dealing, and that such people should be allowed to use and to profit by arguments that fall short of a mathematical accuracy. And this is a principle which affects you as much as anybody, since your own fall would be visited by the most terrible vengeance and would be an example to the world.

Athenians: As for us, even assuming that our empire does come to an end, we are not despondent about what would happen next. One is not so much frightened of being conquered by a power which rules over others as of what would happen if a ruling power is attacked and defeated by its own subjects. So far as this point is concerned, you can leave it to us to face the risks involved. What we shall do now is to show you that it is for the good of our own empire that we are here and that it is for the preservation of your city that we shall say what we are going to say. We do not want any trouble in bringing you into our empire, and we want you to be spared for the good both of yourselves and of oursevles.

Melians: And how could it be just as good for us to be the slaves as for you to be the masters?

Athenians: YOu, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster; we by not destroying you , would be able to profit from you.

Melians: So you would not agree to our being neutral, friends instead of enemies, but allies of niether side?

Athenians: No, because it is not so much your hostility that injures us; it is rather the case that, if we were on friendly terms with you, our subjects would regard that as a sign of weakness in us, whereas your hatred is evidence of our power.

The passage indicates that democracy appears to have become the exclusive perogative of Athens and that self-determination of weaker states was contingent on Athenian security and good-will.

The class reacted angrily to the hypocracy of this passage, especially to the denoument in the dry style of Thucidides, which describes the enslavement of the Melians. Questioned further, the class was able to relate the rhetoric of the Athenians to the "Domino Theory" and its application to U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia. The discussion that ensued focused around the conflict of Democracy and power and spoke to the "free world" concept. Nothing was"solved," but the class began to see the ambiguities of democracy and what can happen to a nation's ideals when the circumstances are not ideal or when political pressure is felt.

Other discussions focused on the practical conduct of the war and how "police actions" far from home can erode national resources, manpower and morale. This again, was illustrated by the Athenian campaigns in Sicily which terminated by the virtual annihilation a large Athenian Army at Syracuse.

Although in contemporary terms, Syracuse does not seem too distant from Athens, it was about six hundred miles if ships had to sail around the Peloponnese. If one judges that eighty miles was the average that a ship could make in a day, it would take the better part of eight days for a ship to reach Syracuse, and at least fifteen days to send a message and to receive a reply. In outlining the logistics of supplying an army, it became clear to the class that the Athenians should have realized from the beginning that expedition was unfeasible - both because it was poorly planned and because Sicily was too distant to be supplied adequately. Besides, the citizens of Athens kept receiving favorable reports of military operations and were unprepared for the news of the disaster. [Book Vlll, Chap 1].

> "When the news of the defeat reached Athens, for a long time people would not believe it, even though they were given precise information from the very soldiers who had been present at the event and had escaped; still they though that this total destruction was something that could not possibly be true. And when they did recognize the facts, they turned against the public speakers who had been in favour of the expedition, as though they themselves had not voted for it, and also became angry with the prophets and soothsayers and all who at the time had, by various methods of divination, encouraged them to believe that they would conquer Sicily."

It also was clear that the defeat of the Athenian army occurred with very little cost to Spartans-

the declared adversary of Athens. At the suggestion of Alcibiades - the discredited Athenian general, the Spartans sent Gylippus, a technical adviser, with a relatively small number of troops. Yet it was possible for him to organize the Syracusian defense to deal effectively with the Athenians. He played on the overconfidence of the Athenians and changed his tactics frequently. He also used guerilla warfare and quick attacks at unexpected places to wear the Athenians down and create psychological uncertainty. The result was the virtual annihilation of the Athenian army, with very little cost to the Spartans whose fighting was done by the Syracusans.

Finally, the class observed that the Athenians might have salvaged the Peloponesian War if they had been willing to settle for less than total victory or unconditional surrender. This was especially true after the battle of Arginusae which restored the wavering fortunes of Athens yet Cleophon refused to make an honorable peace and urged the people to hold out for total victory. A similar thing had happened earlier in the war when the popular leader Hyperbolus, convinced the people not to make peace with Sparta. The aggressiveness and greed of the politicians who needed the war to remain in office, to increase their power or to satisfy their egos was responsible for the crushing defeat and humiliation of Athens and led to the destruction of the most noble experiment in

Democracy of the ancient world.

Although no two periods of history are exactly alike, we can learn much from the past, lest by our ignorance of history we be compelled to re-live it.

Thucidides in modern context makes rewarding reading and can fascinate a class and change their prejudice that antiquity is for museums and quivering scholars toiling in the dusty archives of obscure libraries.